

## Instruction + Innovation = Inspiration

### A Personal Report on “Commodifying (Post-)colonialism”: Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English, University of Regensburg, May 22–25, 2008

In stark contrast to the charming liveliness in the ancient history of Regensburg lies the deserted university building on this religious holiday in an expanse of flatness. For the many-headed delegation from Bern, the newly expanded outpost of GNEL in Switzerland, the lack of mountains, or at the very least of a few hills, at the horizon is an almost physically painful experience. However, we quickly realized that none of these external factors would be relevant during those four days, where we would need all our attention focused on the papers and discussions in order to be able to carry away as much scholarly loot as possible from this raid into academic Germany. The choice of the equation as the form of the title is influenced by the bleak de-historicized atmosphere of the 1970s concrete labyrinths of the University of Regensburg, bringing to mind cutting edge natural science, physicists pondering mathematical puzzles and micro-biologists dissecting the innermost secrets of life. The content of the title, however, mirrors the warmth of the welcome, the richness of personal exchange, and the academic enthusiasm we experienced at our first GNEL conference. Rainer Emig's true and poised hospitality pervaded the mood of the demanding, crammed and perfectly programmed four days in Regensburg.

On the first morning of the conference, after the challenging task of finding one's way amongst the amazingly uniform-looking corridors of the various buildings on campus, it was quickly established which hotel provided the tastiest breakfast buffet, before we were being ushered into the authentically decorated period piece of a lecture room. Cushioned chairs in lusciously dark red velvet! Graham Huggan (Leeds University, UK) and his book *The Postcolonial Exotic – Marketing the Margins* of 2001 seemed to provide a thread for the four days, likely to win the price for Most Quoted of this year's conference. In his keynote on “Celebrity Conservationism, (Post)Colonialism and the Commodity Form”, he stressed the interaction between global capitalism and colonialism concerning the effects of commodification. The importance of studying empirically the contexts of literary production, specifically the markets and consumption on a global, regional and local level, was a suggestion referred to by various subsequent speakers. Immediately after the lecture, a lively discussion was initiated by Sarah Brouillette (MIT, Boston, MA), quickly joined by various scholars, leaving us inexperienced PhD students to wonder at and admire the marvels of academic debate. What a spectacular start into our first conference experience! We inwardly congratulated ourselves to our choice of career path.

The following first panel session, chaired by Tobias Döring (Munich), which was fittingly entitled “Theorising and Historicising (Post-)Colonial Commodification,” plunged right into the intricacies of the theoretical debate. Jens Gurr (Essen) pointed out the need of academia to reflect the entanglement of diverse phenomena in the postcolonial marketplace with certain trends in scholarly research. The paper was based on the thesis that Bourdieu’s notion of the different forms of capital as representing the structure of the social world might be able to account for these trends as well as the commercialization of (sub)cultural products. Gurr maintained that Bourdieu’s autonomy/heteronomy dichotomy falls short here, where simplification and conceptualization is necessary for the analysis, suggesting that the commodification of subversion can supplement or even replace the Bourdieuan opposition. The paper went on to claim that more recent transnational developments were undertheorized by Bourdieu, and asked for a theoretical model which can be used to treat global interactions and cultural self-positioning. This tied in with the reflections of Frank Schulze-Englers (Frankfurt a.M.), who at the end of his paper proposed methodological cosmopolitanism as opposed to methodological nationalism as a means of coming to terms with a globalised modernity. Being at the very start of our own PhD theses, and in the middle of the process of coming to terms with the theories and methods useful for our work, this panel immediately inspired us to brush up on some of the older theories discussed in the papers – still more work for us!

The next day’s keynote of Carl Plasa’s “Black Sugar” disappointed expectations of a sweet Saturday morning treat by confronting us with ideas of cannibalism, linking the art and consumption of confectionary with slavery. Plasa represented the history of sugar in the Caribbean as a horror story. Even at the time, sugar planters were considered epitomes of capital exploitation and cultural degeneration. In abolitionist texts of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the cannibal consumer becomes a figure of speech linking the cruelty in the production of sugar with its blissful consumption. George Eliot in her short story “Brother Jacob” mirrored the art of confectionary with the confection of art. Plasa linked the relationship between white and black saccharographies historically with the analysis of texts, paralleling “Brother Jacob” with the novel *The Polished Hoe* (2002) by Austin Clarke where the labour in the field relates directly to the labours of storytelling. What a start into a sunny weekend!

Cecile Sandten’s (Chemnitz) keynote “Phantasmagorical Representations of Postcolonial Cityscapes in Salman Rushdie’s *Fury* and Suketu Mehta’s *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*” further illustrated the topical variety of the conference papers. Sandten was one of several presenters establishing a close link between postcolonial and urban studies. The texts represent the metropolis as a multicultural meeting place, multilayered and multifaceted, as “a collection of transients” (Mehta). The subsequent plenary discussion questioned the status of the city as character writing itself into existence, underlining the necessity of a narrator. The discussion after the paper was linked to a question regularly reappearing in our minds and in the discussions and papers during the con-

ference: Is cosmopolitanism imaginable without urbanity? Is cosmopolitanism conflated with the metropolitan?

Another salient feature permeating the conference was that of transcultural sound and film, especially in the context of British South Asian artists, which proved to be sort of a leitmotif for the conference title with regard to postcolonial cultural production. Aspects of cultural politics, exoticism, representations of national history and postcolonial cityscapes were investigated within various media. Johannes Salim Ismaiel-Wendts (Bremen) contributed a music studies presentation on postcolonial cityscapes in popular music under the enigmatic heading of "Kpafucality". His quote of the song by Transglobal Underground called the "Sikh Man and the Rasta" put in a nutshell the performative nature of identity in the urban underbelly: "The Sikh Man and the Rasta have no fear / The Sikh Man and the Rasta cut no hair".

The discussion of the artist's role as a marketable personality was developed in more detail and specificity within the literary market in Sarah Brouillette's Sunday keynote "Booking Daljit Nagra: Author as Meta-Brand in the Postcolonial UK". This British poet's conscious positioning between saleable Asian British minority poet and the marketing of his productions tends to shift the focus onto the author's commodification rather than his work. Brouillette argued that while evaluating a work of art, its status as commodity in a market of consumers is inseparable from the scholarly investigation of its artistic merits. At the same time, however, she stressed the necessity of being wary of mistaking the clownish marketing performance of an author for the content or wider significance of his work.

The toils of the demanding days were recompensed, however, not only by the great company during the social parts of the programme, but especially by the literary evening, which provided us with the delightful reading of the Welsh poet Tiffany Atkinson from Aberystwyth. To be given the opportunity to listen to her poems – which make a life-like invocation of the tumbling colour of everyday existence – definitely was one of the highlights of the conference. There are certain images Atkinson managed to put in the audience's mind we are sure are there to stay for a long while yet – combining the comic and the tragic in an exquisite manner.

Apart from the great topical variety and degree of input, we were immensely encouraged by the fact that even as students at the very start of our first large research project, we were at all times taken seriously by the experienced scholars at the conference, who took time to discuss our work and input, to give advice, encouragement and stimulation. This interest was reflected by the abundance of suggestions we were able to take back home as a result of the poster session as well as the informal conversations in breaks and during meals. The uncomplicated and spontaneous mix of students, post-graduates and professors at the various tables led to many fascinating exchanges, sometimes hilariously funny storytelling of life in academia, and the occasional clumsy blunder on the part of the new members – us.

The Under Construction session chaired by Susanne Reichl (University of Vienna, Austria) was enlightening in at least two ways. Firstly, the surprise that it was not the session that was under construction but the work presented by young scholars. Secondly, the degree of inspiration and input we were able to take with us from these presentations of work in progress, and especially the discussion thereof in a room full of established and experienced scholars, was one of the main factors enabling us to profit immensely from this conference.

We embarked on the seven hour train ride back home to Bern full of ideas and motivation, tired and exhausted, happy and relieved that most potential disasters concerning one's initiation at an academic conference did not come to pass. Conferences are fun, how good is that! Regrets only stem from the impossibility of hearing all papers and interesting ideas presented in the abstracts we read on the (this time conveniently long) train ride to Regensburg. Unfortunately, one was also being haunted by the many clever answers one *should* have given to some of the questions asked after the presentation – answers, which occurred to the speaker hours too late.

From the charming welcome at the *Fürstliches Brauhaus* next to the Thurn und Taxis castle (where our first impression was that we were barging into a dinner party among old friends) to the fantastically sensuous Indian food at the impromptu restaurant in room PT 3.0.81, and the Bavarian conference dinner at the *Spitalgarten* – a Biergarten elegantly combining the folkloric and the luxurious in a distinctly Bavarian manner – we sensed that our sympathy and interest were returned in equal manner. Even before becoming official members at the GNEL members' conference, we felt accepted into the informal community of the GNEListi.

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